

GEORGE FOREMAN FIGHTS ONE FIGHT TOO MANY

CBS had a camera crew outside the Lucky grocery store in Loma Alta, California, to film the will-work-for-food pan-handlers for a filler on a slow news day, when Ruth Leahy, a stocky, fiftyish woman in a turquoise jogging suit, exited the store and pushed by the beggars. One of them made a disparaging remark about Ruth's weight. Ruth dropped her plastic grocery bags and cold-cocked the man-with-the-mouth with a short left hook off a jab. His three partners turned and ran.

Dan Rather grinned as he introduced the story about the fed-up middle-aged woman who "kicked butt and took names later," and ex-heavyweight champion George Foreman's manager — dollar signs popping over his head like fireworks — got on the horn to directory assistance in Loma Alta to get ahold of this Leahy woman to make her a deal.

George's last fight had been a squeaker against a journeyman named Stewart. There were no more offers to fight for the championship. But a match against this tough and plucky Leahy woman, this could put him back in the spotlight.

Ruth was guaranteed a hundred grand. Angelo Dundee came in the last week to polish her style. Ruth split a heavy bag and almost killed Orlin Norris, one of her sparring partners. Her weight was down to 195 from the road work, but Dundee said, "Don't tell the press; we'll tell 'em we've bulked her up to two-thirty."

George came in at two thirty-five. Ruth's husband, Ellis, rubbed her shoulders as she stared across the ring at that mountain of a man. "Double jab, Ruthie," Ellis whispered in her ear. "Then bring the right hand over the top."

George's first jab — straight and hard, a boxing glove on the end of a telephone pole — blasted Ruth's new bouffant all to hell and sat her down on the seat of her pants. Angelo Dundee screamed through the ropes, "Move your goddamn head when he throws that thing!" George grinned. Another easy payday, is what he was thinking, until Ruth ducked under his next jab and hit him with a series of body shots that would have knocked an ox down. From that point on, George decided to fight from a distance. Jab, jab, jab. And if she tried to move inside, grab her and lean on her.

It worked for most of the fight. He stayed outside and piled up points. He was able to put Ruth on the canvas late in the eighth (too late; the bell saved her) with one of his swooping left hooks to her jaw. But in the ninth, George suffered an embarrassment that, while it didn't cost him the fight, it did make him reconsider, for the final time, retirement from the ring....

After knocking Ruth down in the eighth, George came out for the kill in the ninth. A thumping left to the liver and a crushing right to the kidney drove Ruth back into the ropes. But George missed his next punch, and Ruth moved inside, bounced her forehead off his sternum and came up with a vicious right upper cut that lifted George a foot off the canvas before it dropped him on his butt. Ruth, dripping blood from the nose and mouth, her once crisp bouffant sticking out straight from her head like dandelion fuzz, raised her hands over her head. Flash bulbs popped (Ruth, in this pose, appeared on the cover of the next Sports Illustrated). Angelo Dundee kissed Ruth's husband, Ellis. Mills Lane, the referee, started the count. George beat it, but the fight was just clinch and dance from then on, with George so far ahead on points that he couldn't lose it.

A BAKER IN A DOUGHNUT SHOP

Ronnie Tagge sat on the concrete step outside the back door of Nguyen's Donut Shop after his shift, drinking coffee and watching the dust devils swirl down the alley, thinking that somehow those tiny twisters — lifting a paper cup here and dashing it against the dumpster, grabbing a yellow newspaper page there and shooting it to the roof — were in some way little manifestations of God, little concentrations of order born from chaos, like galaxies.

And then his thoughts swirled back to Jackie Nguyen, his boss....

He'd been making doughnuts for her since he graduated from high school and, tonight, after two years of platonic wee hours close proximity with that exotically pretty older woman (forty years old if she was a day), Ronnie — with no more reason than a young man's fire and a year-old memory of Jackie clinging to him and soaking the shoulder of his t-shirt with her tears the night her husband died by the deep fryer — weakened, made an impetuous move: 'round about four in the morning, as Jackie dragged the twenty-quart mixing bowl across the floor, Ronnie stepped away from his cinnamon roll yeast dough and gave her protruding butt a gentle, almost apologetic goose.

Jackie popped up straight and turned and glared, and Ronnie took a step backwards and said, "Oh God, Jackie, I'm sorry." The next thing he knew she was heaving his yeast dough off the table. The fleshy blob thumped to the floor and sent up a cloud of flour dust that curled back down off the ceiling, and Jackie grabbed Ronnie by the front of the shirt and pushed him down on the cleared table and mounted and